

**SERMON**

*prepared by the Rev. Anne HK Apple*

In late September, Hurricane Helene was expected to create damage in the nook of Florida called the Big Bend. It was to be a direct hit in the community I last served, a community I love. Instead, as the Sanguine Moon waited to rise full upon the horizon, the hurricane wreaked havoc unexpectedly in the mountains and valleys of Western North Carolina and East Tennessee. And that’s the place I call home. The places where families, including mine, gather and worship under the cover of ancient oaks and beside rocky Appalachian creeks, crushed under the weight of wind-toppled trees and mountain sides washed away in raging flood waters.

The haste of flood waters dug new channels for creek beds and roadways. Flash floods took practical necessities and pleasures, memories and mementos, limbs and lives. Flash floods washed away bridges and technologies, preparing a way for the darkness of disconnection and isolation. The breeding grounds for fear were plowed in the unexpected, weighty darkness of the despair born out of a disaster. The wounded world was raw, known in visceral ways where complicated grief became the wild edge of sorrow.

What was became what was not. Darkness covered the face of the earth. And although I was not in the storm, arriving instead to the damage days later, I have found myself at a loss for words, silenced by the enormity of the collective trauma for these communities. It is hard to understand how the world goes on when it is falling apart right in front of you. Hunger and thirst became the universal challenge.

One recipient of the Christmas Joy Offering supports assistance grants offered by the Board of Pensions. Typically offered to pastors in need upon applying, when Hurricane Helene hit, the Board of Pensions made these assistance grants available to not only pastors, but all church employees. Immediate, imminent needs for clean water, food and shelter were met with contributions from the Christmas Joy Offering.

As you reflect on the years you have lived, is there a moment or event that stands out more than others? Do you have a memory that is as fresh as the morning dew, though maybe it happened years ago? It may seem ancient, and yet you remember it as new? When my husband and I were young adults, we worshiped in a congregation in Alabama. We became part of this church because my childhood pastor from Memphis, a social justice pastor theologian, was serving here.

One Sunday, the choir from Stillman College was touring, and they, as they had done years before, were helping lead worship. At the end of the service, the choir quietly moved to fill the outer aisles of the sanctuary, encircling the congregation. Out of silent stillness, one voice sang:

Why should I feel discouraged?
And why should the shadows come?
Why should my heart feel lonely?

And then the many and powerful young voices joined in sung benediction.

When Jesus is my portion, a constant friend is he
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches over me.
I sing because I’m happy. I sing because I’m free.
I sing because I know his eye is on the sparrow,
and I know he watches over me.

They led us, reminding us of our roots as the people of God who live in a wounded world. The people of God who are called to be present with Christ’s love who calls to us, “Come to me, you who are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” When the benediction was complete, the echoing strands settled into us. We sing because we know. We are God’s people who need one another to build trust, especially in the mysteries that can be too difficult to explain.

With God’s help, we trust ourselves to do the hard work of discipleship. That work is known best to me in Matthew 25, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me something to drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you gave me clothing.”

And sometimes that means looking inward to understand who we are. Sometimes that means listening in new ways, prioritizing long silenced voices. Sometimes that can even mean making changes in church practices that have become actions of comfort, not necessarily discerned ministry.

The gospel awakens us to be attentive to the places and people where connections are made in Christ and God’s grace is known more fully. God watches over us, in Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, in a wounded world. No matter the change and discomfort before us. I know this truth of attention through the recovery work from the despair of Hurricane Helene. As pastor Mary Katherine Robinson of Black Mountain Presbyterian Church preached on a Sunday after the devastation, what we have heard is the joy of the watchful eye and roar of Christ’s love.

The Stillman Choir sang, “And I know Christ watches over us.”

Just as God watched over Mary, who also came to sing a powerful song, the Magnificat. “My Spirit rejoices in God my Savior … he hath filled the hungry with good things.”

“Joy is the oxygen for doing hard things.” Gary Haugen, founder and CEO of the International Justice Mission, says that people who are passionate about justice can sometimes feel guilty for enjoying their life; they feel the need to “wallow in the darkness and in the sorrow 24/7 because it seems to honor, in a way, and respect the depth of the tragedy” and the sorry found in injustice.

It’s like the airplane oxygen mask rule: “Secure your own mask before helping others.” Haugen says, “Each person needs to figure out what refreshes them with joy. In the absence of that, I just don’t think you can sustainably take on a struggle for justice.”

What refreshes us, as the church and individual disciples of it, with joy? Being the church, the Body of Christ, broken yet healed, serving in a wounded world, I wonder how often we contemplate the necessity for expressions of our joy in Christ.

Robin Wall Kimmerer, director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment at the State University of New York, reminds us in her book “Braiding Sweetgrass,”“Even a wounded world is feeding us … holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. She says, “I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily, and I must return the gift.” Kimmerer expresses a desire to bear witness to joy.

The Christmas Joy Offering gives us an opportunity to bear witness to our joy in Christ. We trust the generosity we have learned and give freely that we might provide leadership development opportunities and help Presbyterian-related schools and colleges equipping communities of color provide opportunities for future leaders, like the Stillman College Choir who led the church in song, and also the Menaul School in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and the Pan American School in Texas.

As we imagine the encounter between Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, we are wise to remember the joyful gift of the Christ child. We serve with One who was born an infant Savior to a virginal mother who came to the wounded world to feed, hold and save us; to teach us to trust love and care for the least of these as paramount; to send us to make a difference with joyful hearts in the wounded places in the world.

There is a reciprocity to be found in the joy we have in Christ that acknowledges gratitude for what is immediately before us. What do we know and hope for each day?

Especially about the places and ways Christ feeds, holds and saves us to send us into a wounded world — how *do* we choose joy over despair?

And that, as the church, as individual disciples and as a whole, is hard work to discern.

In her book “Night Magic: Adventures Among Glowworms, Moon Gardens, and Other Marvels of the Dark,” Leigh Ann Henion tells the story of a child who is lost in a forest. Can you imagine the terror and the fear for the child and parents? Can you imagine the questions each might be asking?

Where am I? Will they find me? Will they be mad at me for wandering? How did this happen to us? What will we do? How will we live if our child dies?

A rescuer found the lost child curled like a doe tucked away in the leaf litter of the forest floor, where turkey tail mushrooms and bark beetles thrived. Imagine the relief and the sheer joy of that moment. And here’s something interesting: The rescue worker did not pull the child up from the forest floor nor whisk him immediately away to an ambulance, artificially lit.

Instead, the rescuer lowered himself to the ground beside the boy. He met the child where he was and asked him to describe what he had seen and felt during the lonely and lost hours he’d spent in the dark. The child described the sounds of creatures cackling and tiny feet tickling his skin. The rescuer, to the best of his ability, explained what he could about those noises and creeping insects.

The rescuer shaped the child’s life for good in that moment of “wounded world” darkness coming to a brightening and for the future. Memories of that moment of being found alone and terrified would forever be gentled by remembering the care of the rescuer who saw him where he was, who dropped down to the ground and asked questions, listened and helped him to make meaning in the fright of being lost. The rescuer made a way to “hold space for darkness” and to “prepare a way” for joy in the future.

Early on, Mary, the mother of Jesus, asks the question, “How could this be?” How is it that a virgin could be with a child? Biologically impossible, and … she knows her body. And yet theologically, this is the reality. With God, all things are possible. After she asks this question, “How could this be?” the Scriptures tell us that the angel departed.

Absent the angel, Mary had a story that she needed to tell to someone, so with haste she makes her way to the house of Zechariah and greets Elizabeth, his wife.

Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people, righteous rule followers. They also knew together the dark pain of infertility. Zechariah knew about angels with messages. He had had an encounter in the temple with an angel that had terrified and overwhelmed him. The angel comforted him and promised that he would have an heir, that Elizabeth would bear life into this world. The angel says that with this new life will come joy and gladness. But Zechariah is suspicious, maybe even curmudgeonly, and asks a question, “How can I know this will happen?” And the short of the story is that Zechariah is made mute. The snark in me says, “He’ll never ask that question again!”

Elizabeth, his wife, is an older woman, chosen by God. She is pregnant and has spent five months in seclusion with her mute husband. She is waiting to bring John the Baptist into this world. John the Baptist, who will be the locust-eating prophet who prepares a way for the Lord. John the Baptist who will lose his life for preparing the way.

Mary, who had asked the “How could this be?” question, is the younger woman, also chosen by God. She will bring Jesus into this wounded world, Life and Light, the Son of God, Immanuel — God with us.

Why has this happened to me?

This is *the* question that Elizabeth asks Mary when the life within her womb leaps for joy when Mary arrives to tell her story and comes into her presence and greets her.

That might be the most universal of questions.

Why has this happened to me?

Make an ask for offering as a way out.